

ARTICLE 1  
ON PAGE A-11RICHMOND TIMES - DISPATCH  
13 APRIL 1983

## Tip O'Neill's Caribbean

*By Rowland Evans and Robert Novak***WASHINGTON — House Speaker**

Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill is emerging as a behind-the-scenes power shadowing President Reagan's Caribbean policy in a way that threatens the administration's hopes for a Marxist-free Central America.

When liberal Rep. David Obey of Wisconsin late last month whispered in O'Neill's ear on the House floor that Chairman Clarence (Doc) Long of the House Foreign Operations Subcommittee might finesse a formal vote on Reagan's emergency aid for El Salvador, O'Neill intervened to assure a vote. That undermined both Reagan and Doc Long of Maryland. Then, early this week, word passed quietly to the Oval Office that O'Neill was considering a personal intervention to scotch Reagan's secret plan to undermine the Marxist Nicaraguan government.

O'Neill's sudden and, from Reagan's standpoint, malevolent interest in the administration's Latin policy is only partly a signal that the 1984 presidential campaign is now on the political threshold. It also signals a growing suspicion among liberal Democrats that Reagan has become vulnerable, particularly in his anti-Marxist policies in Central America. These Democrats are prodding O'Neill and he seems to be responding.

OBEY WAS regarded as a crucial swing vote among the eight Democrats on crusty Doc Long's subcommittee, but his confidential appeal to O'Neill showed that in fact he opposed the president. Long's panel must approve, reject or modify Reagan's request to reprogram \$60 million for El Salvador that was voted for other causes last year. Long, understanding the emergency nature of the request and the relatively piddling sums involved, was inclined to let the president have most of what he wanted — without a formal vote.

Reports differ on whether O'Neill, after hearing Obey's warning, wrote Long a letter, asked him on the phone,

or spoke to him person-to-person about Obey's demand for a formal vote. Whichever it was, it had the effect of dashing Reagan's hopes for quick action. Committee opponents of the emergency aid (for small arms and ammunition) are pushing a dozen different demands on the Salvadoran government as the price for freeing the U.S. aid money, all of which must now be considered.

O'Neill's Nicaraguan intervention, though more shrouded, is intended both to destabilize Reagan's anti-Sandinista effort and to worsen his Salvadoran problem. Liberal Democrats schooled to hate any U.S. Latin policy not built on human rights and pure democracy want O'Neill to challenge Reagan's U.S.-financed campaign against Nicaragua's Marxist regime.

IF O'NEILL personally steps out front in the liberal-led demand for a congressional investigation of CIA involvement in the anti-Sandinista campaign, the result could be a public clamor forcing the administration to cease and desist — or a new law vetoing the anti-Sandinista effort. The debate could be corrosive enough to claim the emergency-aid program in Salvador as a companion victim.

The aim is clear: Push the speaker into an attack against CIA intervention in Nicaragua, knowing that Reagan's ability to respond would be severely limited because of secrecy requirements. Then, as one official explained to us, "The administration will get beaten up on Nicaragua so badly that aid to Salvador will go down, too."

As the agent of crippling maneuvers against Reagan's Latin policy, O'Neill is being positioned for an unaccustomed foreign policy role. He told a press conference recently in Peking: "To be perfectly frank, my knowledge of international affairs is extremely limited. We're concerned [on Capitol Hill] with domestic affairs" — domestic and political.

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